

#### IV

### SIR WALTER SCOTT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A CENTENARY lecture is hardly the right place for controversy, defense, or apology. Perhaps we may assume that our man is great, and go ahead on that premise. But Oliver Wendell Holmes has a word to say on the subject of centenaries:

Little of all we value here  
Wakes on the morn of its hundredth year  
Without both feeling and looking queer.

So it is even with the reputation of Sir Walter Scott. Once a best-seller and a popular idol, he is sometimes relegated nowadays to a position of lukewarm respectability. Too often he is regarded as the kind of author whose works stand neglected on the shelves of the old-fashioned parlor bookcase. When the young read Scott, it is felt that they are doing something vaguely commendable. How amazed Sir Walter would have been if he had known that he would be made into schoolbooks, like Shakespeare, and how he would have deplored any arrangement of the kind! His shrewdness would have foreseen, too, that he would have to pay the penalty of such a position. Many kinds of people still read and enjoy his work, but his typical admirer is likely to be a sedate conservative person who thinks that young people nowadays read trash. The defense of Scott is, so to speak, too official. It is conducted by people who are committed in advance to the classics. Outside of studies and classrooms and libraries, cheerful scoffers are to be

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heard. On a sentimental journey to Scotland I fell into the habit of asking people whether they still read Sir Walter Scott. The answers were not always encouraging. One man remarked lightly, "I think he went out with porridge," and another, "Give me P. G. Wodehouse." At least these people were not weighed down with an oppressive sense of responsibility. But if we pass to the other extreme, and interview those who take their literature very seriously, we likewise discover a certain condescension toward Scott. A few months ago the *Nation* printed a short editorial paragraph on the Scott centenary, to the effect that this could hardly be called an important literary anniversary. Scott, we were given to understand, affords no nourishment for the modern mind. Perhaps the best way to meet such comment as this will be to examine the grounds for it.

One difficulty that confronts us is that the novelist himself was disposed to give away his case. His attitude toward his own work was one of humorous depreciation, maintained with great good nature and consistency. In all his hundreds of letters and conversations there is no sign of wounded vanity, no pompousness, no false dignity. This does not mean that he never showed sensitiveness or rancor; there are sore spots in his business career and his political activities, but in no case are his grievances or irritations to be traced to the wounded egotism of the artist. Underneath all this there was genuine humility, and nearer the surface there were the easy manners of the eighteenth-century gentleman and the hearty practicality of the Scottish laird. Sir Walter could analyze himself pretty well, and unaffectedly pointed out his own merit here:

I have always remarked that literary people think themselves obliged to take somewhat of a constrained & affected turn in conversation[,] seeming to consider themselves as less a part of the company than something which the rest

were come to see & wonder at. If your Ladyship's friendship is not too partial in supposing me less quizzical than my neighbours it is not owing to any good sense of my own but to the fortunate circumstances which connected me with good company & led me to feel myself at home in it long before I made any literary essays. Since my success I have always endeavoured to play my little part in society as quietly & good humouredly as I could. (To Lady Abercorn, Jan. 1, 1812.)

He laughed at the idea of playing literary lion in London, and would say to his friends,

Yet know that I one Snug the joiner am,  
No lion fierce.

We still like our men of letters to take this attitude in society, but in autobiography and self-criticism we expect them to be serious. We are willing that they shall be solemn, and we are all the more impressed if they are hierophantic and apocalyptic. In his genial prefaces and letters Scott explains things very simply, to this effect: "My dear reader, if you happen to be interested, just let me say that such and such old stories were in my head, and this is what came of it." Henry James's prefaces, on the other hand, discuss his novels as problems to be solved with all the resources of the intellect. D. H. Lawrence, in our own day, writes as if the crucifixion of humanity, soul and body, lay back of his books. But must we always wait for the author to tell us what is important? Scott's self-depreciation is in the good old Anglo-Saxon tradition of understatement, and Chaucer had set the example long before—"My wit is short, ye may wel understonde." This attitude, as Professor Cazamian has shown, is of the very essence of English humor. It is complexly mingled with the amateur ideal of the gentleman, which appears in the Renaissance courtesy-books; a gentleman should not be a professional, and though

he may well write, he should toss off his things easily, without laying much stress on them.

All this is refreshing after the portentous solemnity of other artists we know, but it must be admitted that it has its limitations and disadvantages. In the eighteenth century—to which rather than to the nineteenth Scott belonged—it shaded into a profound distrust of the workings of the imagination, as if one had to apologize for being a genius. Hence came the endless preachments of the time contrasting reason and imagination, sound principle and errant impulse, sense and sensibility. Scott often viewed his life and work under these categories, and here the modern critic cannot go the whole length with him. It is all very well to be modest and natural about one's work, but it is going too far to say that one's work is insignificant or superficial. Nor did Scott mean this in good earnest, though he sometimes seems to say as much. Thus he writes to Wordsworth about *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

I am truly happy that you have found anything to interest or amuse you in my romance. It has the merit of being written with heart & good-will and for no other reason than to discharge my mind of the ideas which from infancy have rushed upon it. I believe such verses will be generally found interesting because enthusiastic. Having thus expelled from my brain the Fiend of Chivalry & sent him to wander at will through the world I must sweep & garnish the empty tenement & decorate or rather fill it with something useful, least the former tenant should return with seven devils worse than himself & take possession for good & aye. (March 16, 1805.)

Scott turns on romanticism itself, and when he speaks slightly of his projects and visions he is playing the rôle of Sancho Panza to his own Don Quixote. In the novels, the romantic youth such as Edward Waverley or Frank Osbaldistone is made slightly ridiculous; the romantically composed scene is frequently touched off with anti-climax.

Waverley is a sort of faded Quixote, whose youthful reading is Scott's own, and this relatively jejune and superficial characterization is based on the eighteenth-century conception of Cervantes as a burlesque author, a mere satirist of fantasy. But at his best Scott transcends this attitude, and we pass from satirical allusions to quixotism to find in that neglected masterpiece, his *Journal*, entries which approach the philosophical vision of Cervantes:

I do not compare myself, in point of imagination, with Wordsworth—far from it; for [his] is naturally exquisite, and highly cultivated by constant exercise. But I can see as many castles in the clouds as any man, as many genii in the curling smoke of a steam engine, as perfect a Persepolis in the embers of a sea-coal fire. My life has been spent in such day-dreams. But I cry no roast meat. (Jan. 1, 1827.)

Since the time when this was written, the out and out romantics, those who move in a realm of imagination—Coleridge, Keats, Shelley—have won our suffrages at the expense of those, notably Byron and Scott, whose work was strongly marked by a shrewd and humorous realism. Scott and Byron have lost ground; we hold it against them that they aroused the enthusiasm of a public that misunderstood Wordsworth and Coleridge, and martyred Keats and Shelley. They followed the gleam only part of the way. To put the situation very unfavorably, they tried to have their cake and eat it too, to wander between two worlds and yet to make the most of both of them. This attitude does not command our entire admiration, but in the long run it will prove to be of great human interest. Whole generations to come will feel the same maladjustment which Scott experienced and expressed genially, which Byron experienced and expressed misanthropically.

The Quixote theme in Scott is not the resultant of a mere interplay of literary categories, but develops from the

integralism of the Scottish character, its idealism tinged with canniness.<sup>1</sup> It is a matter of temperament and mood, not of sustained meditation. Here again the modern reader often parts company with the novelist, for he may be an admirer of intellectual fiction which depends on character-analysis rather than character-creation, on heightened self-consciousness rather than half-understood impulse. Scott lacks intellectual distinction, and when he broaches ideas his thought is woolly rather than crystalline. The Scotchman is popularly supposed to subsist on doctrines and dogmas, but as we look more closely at him, we find that he is concerned with facts, deeds, and prejudices rather than with a free play of ideas. He likes an anecdote or a controversy better than a theory. Sir Walter, although he was outside the tradition of Calvinism, was thoroughly national in his enjoyment of the pedantries of history and the law and in his ardent political and social prejudices. The Edinburgh lawyer, cracking professional jokes over his claret and planning the policy of the *Tory Quarterly Review*, may seem to us to be of negligible intellectual weight. Matthew Arnold would have denied him high seriousness, as he denied it to Chaucer and Burns. Carlyle, the spiritual heir of the Westland Whigs, finds Scott to be for all his geniality a shallow worldling, untouched by religious awe. What edification do the *Waverley* novels afford? This is at bottom the Puritan objection to any form of art which ranges freely through life and allows the reader to be at ease in Zion. Yet we may ask, Can an art which reaches to the very center of a rich nationality be called superficial or frivolous? To appreciate the weight that Scott carries we must turn from purely moralistic or aesthetic criticism to the historian.

<sup>1</sup>See Aubrey Bell, "Scott and Cervantes," in *Sir Walter Scott To-day* (London, 1932), pp. 73-82.

Professor G. M. Trevelyan, writing of conditions at the time of the Union (1707), points out that the religious division of Scotland "was deep only on its political side; it did not touch the basis of a common Scottish mentality and civilization." He continues: "The broad Scots tongue, of which the highest were not ashamed, the traditions and ballads of each countryside, were the common heritage of all. That was why, two generations later, in the days of Burns and Scott, the poetry and traditions of Scotland went forth to conquer the imagination of men born in less fortunate countries, where rich and poor had no culture in common. Scotland was at once more feudal and more democratic than England."<sup>1</sup>

But granted Scott's candor and his profound nationalism, a modern reader may feel that another stumbling-block remains—his carelessness in technique and style. Many people, I am sure, feel this difficulty to be the most serious of all. Here we have to do with a real and significant change in literary taste, but also with more superficial matters which I may put under the head of literary salesmanship. Scott's stories begin slowly; they proceed at an irregular but often sluggish pace; they do not fulfill all their promises; and they end with a patched-up fifth act in which it is obvious that some of the characters are lagging superfluous on the stage. The method is frankly improvisation, and Scott describes it in the Introductory Epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel*:

I have repeatedly laid down my future work to scale, divided it into volumes and chapters, and endeavoured to construct a story which I meant should evolve itself gradually and strikingly, maintain suspense, and stimulate curiosity; and which, finally, should terminate in a striking catastrophe. But I think there is a demon who seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it

<sup>1</sup>*England under Queen Anne: Ramillies and the Union with Scotland* (London, 1932), p. 185.

astray from the purpose. Characters expand under my hand; incidents are multiplied; the story lingers, while the materials increase; my regular mansion turns out a Gothic anomaly, and the work is closed long before I have attained the point I have proposed. . . . When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty, my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company, although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and ditch to get back into the route again. If I resist the temptation, as you advise me, my thoughts become prosy, flat, and dull; I write painfully to myself, and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more; the sunshine with which fancy had invested the incidents departs from them, and leaves everything dull and gloomy.

The only way to conjure up the demon was to start the pen going over the paper. Scott explains this further in a letter to Miss Seward:

Short Letters are vile things—at least with my feelings the beginning of an epistle is like the first start of a race horse & I would always wish to continue it till I had run over paper enough to have gained as jockeys say my speed or in plainer language till exertion had become pleasure. (Nov. 30, 1802.)

This is all very well, the reader may say, but why inflict the preliminary canter on the reader? Or, to use another sporting metaphor, we may argue that we have paid to see the game, and not the hour in which the players are warming up. On the other hand, we know more about race-horses and football teams when we have watched them in practice, and similarly we know more about a novelist when we watch him working out his combinations, approaching his point, or approximating his effects. The impression a novel makes is cumulative, and can never be concentrated in jewels five words long or even five paragraphs long. It has often been noticed that it is impossible to make an anthology of extracts from novels. To know a novelist one must live in his world, and living in Scott's world means



accompanying him in the process of trial and error that was his quest for romance. Scott falls far short of an absolute standard of clarity, directness, and efficiency in the conduct of his narratives. The modern reader is expected to respond to a brisk and ingratiating approach, and to delight in something like the technique of the short story. At least magazine editors and teachers of the art of writing are firmly of the opinion that the human mind is disinclined to pay attention to anything whatever, and they recommend devices for entrapping the reader which are parallel to the deadly shock-attacks of modern salesmanship. But they will never be able to impose on the whole or the most important part of prose fiction the swift gambits of Stevenson and O. Henry, the rapier-like thrusts of Kipling. No one can say *a priori* how rapidly a novel should move or how rigorously it should be unified. Perhaps the nub of this objection to Scott is that the reader expects a narrative such as Stevenson or Dumas can give. But Scott does not profess to offer such a narrative, except in the secondary work of his middle period.

Sometimes, particularly in the earlier novels from *Waverley* to *Rob Roy*, Scott tries to unify his plot by giving over control of its secret to a picturesque outlaw or outcast, to Donald Bean Lean, Meg Merrilies, Edie Ochiltree, or Rob Roy. In this matter he set a bad example for the Victorian novelists; he over-compensated for a loose and desultory pattern by trying to put a mechanical mystery at the center. The characters thus enlisted in the service of the story are among the most interesting and original in the whole world which Scott created, and represent the highest imaginative realization of which he was capable, but the effects they produce are irregular and uncertain. In the same way, supernatural themes in Scott are never at the center of the story,

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except in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, but come and go in rather haphazard fashion. It is all very well to complain, as a recent critic has done, that the most important things in a story should be in the most important places. But when we consider how few authors in the Anglo-Saxon tradition have succeeded in working by rigid logic and remorseless selection, we may be the more content to wander through Scott's Gothic mansions.

If we look at the paragraph instead of the chapter or the volume, we find that Scott commands for better or worse several styles, and that he shifts freely from one to another. At opposite extremes are the elephantine style of late eighteenth century prose and the direct style of the Scots vernacular. In the language of his serious characters, it has often been observed, the first style often becomes intolerable; in his expository comment it is limbered up a bit, but is still heavy, and in his letters and journals it is simplified and enlivened until it becomes a workable medium. On closer analysis of the dialogue in the Waverley novels we may distinguish, as Adolphus does in his *Letters to Richard Heber*, between the speech of the true aristocrat, which sometimes attains distinction, and the speech of the merely polite and fashionable, over which Scott has no command. For the true idiom of the cavalier we may turn to a speech by one of his favorite characters, Claverhouse in *Old Mortality*:

It is not the expiring pang that is worth thinking of in an event that must happen one day, and may befall us on any given moment; it is the memory which the soldier leaves behind him, like the long train of light that follows the sunken sun, that is all which is worth caring for, which distinguishes the death of the brave or the ignoble. When I think of death, Mr. Morton, as a thing worth thinking of, it is in the hope of pressing one day some well-fought and hard-won field of battle, and dying with a shout of victory in my ear;

*that* would be worth dying for, and more, it would be worth having lived for!

Over against this we may set the rejection of Lovel by Miss Wardour in *The Antiquary*:

"I am much embarrassed, Mr. Lovel," replied the young lady, "by your—I would not willingly use a strong word—your romantic and hopeless pertinacity. It is for yourself I plead, that you would consider the calls which your country has upon your talents, that you will not waste, in an idle and fanciful indulgence of an ill-placed predilection, time which, well redeemed by active exertion, should lay the foundation of future distinction."

This is what Alice Meynell calls "a mouthful of thick words." But when the peasants, beggars, gypsies, and soldiers speak Scots, we have nature and literature at one; in the vernacular the novelist achieves the concentration of humor and imagination which is lacking in his English. Between the two extremes is a special language of "humors"—compounded of professional jargon, technicalities, and allusions, largely couched in the vernacular. This manner, of which Scott was so fond that he often used it in his own conversation and correspondence, may be described as an adaptation of the methods of the old comedy of humors to the portrayal of national types. In general, the difference between the good and the bad styles is not merely the difference between Scots and English, or between authentic realism and artificial romance, but between the concentrated and the diffuse, the vital and the perfunctory. It has already been suggested in the quotation from Professor Trevelyan that one of the great advantages of Scottish literature lay in the availability and adequacy of the language of the folk. From this source Burns, Scott, and Carlyle drew their essential strength.

One of the most interesting things about *Waverley* is

the emergence of Scott's various styles, as the progress of the story taxes his resources more and more. We begin with rather heavy expository and summarizing narrative. After the arrival of the hero in Scotland we have formal descriptions of a picturesque background, and a display of the humors of the soldier-pedant Bradwardine. Snatches of song and literary allusions become more frequent, but there is still virtually no dialogue. When Waverley travels into the Highlands the set descriptions and expositions grow more and more picturesque. Flora Mac-Ivor appears in a carefully composed setting "like one of those lovely forms which decorate the landscapes of Poussin," or "a fair enchantress of Boiardo or Ariosto." There is more dialogue, but it is formal and mechanical. Flora talks in a stilted style, and her brother Fergus does not achieve the gentlemanly facetiousness at which Scott aims. Not until Waverley descends to the Lowlands do we find humorous and spontaneous conversation. Scott has at last discovered economy and suggestiveness in dialogue, and after Waverley has joined the Prince in Edinburgh the novelist concentrates his story at last, taking his first long flight in a conversation between Evan Dhu, Fergus Mac-Ivor's follower, and the Edinburgh landlady, Mrs. Flockhart. I quote only the second half of the passage:

"But will ye fight wi' Sir John Cope the morn, Ensign Maccombich?" demanded Mrs. Flockhart of her guest.

"Troth, I'se ensure him, an he'll bide us, Mrs. Flockhart," replied the Gael.

"And will ye face thae tearing chields, the dragoons, Ensign Maccombich?" again inquired the landlady.

"Claw for claw, as Conan said to Satan, Mrs. Flockhart, and the deevil tak the shortest nails."

"And will the colonel venture on the bagganets himsell?"

"Ye may swear it, Mrs. Flockhart; the very first man will he be, by Saint Phedar."

"Merciful goodness! and if he's killed among the red-coats!" exclaimed the soft-hearted widow.

"Troth, if it should sae befall, Mrs. Flockhart, I ken ane that will no be living to weep for him. But we maun a' live the day, and have our dinner; and there's Vich Ian Vohr has packed his *dorlach*, and Mr. Waverley's wearied wi' majoring yonder afore the muckle pier-glass; and that grey auld stoor carle, the Baron o' Bradwardine that shot young Ronald of Ballenkeiroch, he's coming down the close wi' that droghling coghling bailie body they ca' Macwhupple, just the Laird o' Kittlegab's French cook, wi' his turnspit doggie trindling ahint him, and I am as hungry as a gled, my bonny dow; sae bid Kate set on the broo', and do ye put on your pinners, for ye ken Vich Ian Vohr winna sit down till ye be at the head o' the table;—and dinna forget the pint bottle o' brandy, my woman."

Here the suggestions are so rich as almost to overload the passage.

Characteristic of Scott are episodes in which a bit of the vernacular set in a comparatively conventional context gives us the key to the situation. I take an example from *The Antiquary*. Sir Arthur Wardour, his daughter, and the old beggar Edie Ochiltree, who has come to warn them of their danger, are cut off by the tide and despair of their lives:

The countenance of the old man fell. Isabella gave a faint shriek, and "God have mercy upon us!" which her guide solemnly uttered, was piteously echoed by Sir Arthur—"My child! my child! to die such a death!"

"My father! my dear father!" his daughter exclaimed, clinging to him; "and you too, who have lost your own life in endeavouring to save ours!"

"That's not worth the counting," said the old man. "I hae lived to be weary o' life; and here or yonder—at the back o' a dyke, in a wreath o' snaw, or in the wame o' a wave, what signifies how the auld gaberlunzie dies?"

"Good man," said Sir Arthur, "can you think of nothing?—of no help? I'll make you rich; I'll give you a farm; I'll—"

"Our riches will be soon equal," said the beggar, looking out upon the strife of the waters; "they are sae already, for

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I hae nae land, and you would give your fair bounds and barony for a square yard of rock that would be dry for twal hours."

Here the speeches in English may fairly be called commonplace, whereas the words of the beggar have tragic dignity. For the comment in Scots with humorous connotation, we may take a passage from *The Heart of Midlothian*. As the Duke of Argyle is conducting Jeanie Deans to an interview with Queen Caroline, they pause for the famous view from Richmond Hill.

The Duke of Argyle was, of course, familiar with this scene; but to a man of taste it must be always new. Yet, as he paused and looked on this inimitable landscape with the feeling of delight which it must give to the bosom of every admirer of nature, his thoughts naturally reverted to his own more grand, and scarce less beautiful, domains of Inverary. "This is a fine scene," he said to his companion, curious, perhaps, to draw out her sentiments; "we have nothing like it in Scotland."

"It's braw rich feeding for the cows, and they have a fine breed o' cattle here," replied Jeanie; "but I like just as weel to look at the craigs of Arthur's Seat, and the sea coming in ayont them, as at a' thae muckle trees."

Jeanie's words, it will be seen, are at once more specific and more comprehensive than the ordinary prose which envelops them. They show the union of practicality and sentiment in the Scottish nature; they bring out significant differences between England and Scotland, and they have a lilt which sets them apart from the English. The effect, for all the contrast involved, is delicate and unobtrusive, except that Scott underscores it with a harmless but unnecessary comment—"The Duke smiled at a reply equally professional and national."

Back of the irregular plots and the variegated style of the Waverley novels lies amazing and extensive learning. Scott himself would have denied this. He felt that since

he had not learned Greek and Latin in the manner of the British universities he could not count himself a scholar. As he once wrote to a correspondent, "I am more apt to pray to Thor or Woden than Jupiter, think of the fairies oftener than the Dryads, and of Bannockburn and Flodden more than Marathon and Pharsalia." (To the Rev. Mr. Berwick, April 10, 1810.) Yet the pastimes of his leisure hours would be enough to earn him a brace of doctor's degrees in this our age of specialists and sciolists. As a sickly boy he mastered English literature from Spenser and Shakespeare on, ranged European fiction from the mediaeval romances and Cervantes down to Mrs. Charlotte Smith, got a working knowledge of Latin and Old French which gave him the run of the chronicles, and learned Italian to indulge his enthusiasm for the verse of Ariosto and Tasso. His incomparable knowledge of balladry and popular tradition was gained both among the folk and in the library. More superficial, but still considerable for his day, was his interest in Celtic and Scandinavian lore. And this still leaves out of account his professional command of Scottish law, and his familiarity with the doubtful territory between modern British history and literature, which enabled him to edit Swift and Dryden. Compared with all this, the interest in German literature which he showed in the 1790's was trivial, and hardly deserves the prominent place which it occupies in his biography. All these interests were continued and developed through his career, and bore directly on his poems, his novels, and his extensive work as commentator and editor. He thus fulfils Wordsworth's description of the happy warrior as

the generous Spirit, who, when brought  
Among the tasks of real life, hath wrought  
Upon the plan that pleased his boyish thought.

In his best work he knew no opposition between the rich learning of the antiquary and the creative imagination of the novelist and poet. As he says in a letter to Robert Surtees, "My plan . . . has always been rather to exhibit ancient costume, diction, and manners, than to display my own ingenuity in making an ideal world." (April 26, 1808.) He takes his romance where he finds it, and sometimes he seems indiscriminate in his quest for new themes and motives. Thus he writes of *Rokeby*: "Pray help me in this by truth or fiction or tradition. I care not which if it be picturesque." (To J. B. S. Morritt, Dec. 20, 1811.) The last sentence has sometimes been used against him, but the best of his work has a different motive back of it; he begins with a mass of material derived from literature and tradition, and half unconsciously works out a broad plan in which this material shall be set forth by the method of picturesque contrast—contrast between romance and realism, poetry and prose, tragedy and comedy, past and present, noble and peasant, Celt and Saxon, Scot and Englishman. In the years between *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Waverley*, his observation of contemporary fiction and his experience with his own verse romances made him sheer away from elaborate antiquarianism and high-flown sentiment. Thus his program in the Scottish novels from *Waverley* to *A Legend of Montrose* was to put new life into the novel of manners as much as to write historical novels. This point was made in what is perhaps the best criticism of Scott's work that has ever been written, Adolphus's *Letters to Richard Heber*:

When the ruling motives, habitual feelings, and occasional impulses of the agents are natural and consistent, and such as strike us by their analogy to what we have ourselves experienced, then distance of time, remoteness of place, strange incidents, unusual modes of society, no longer freeze



our sympathies or dissipate our curiosity; we become domesticated in castles, convents, and Highland fastnesses; and we converse more sociably with Coeur-de-Lion and the Knight of Snowdown, than with half the heroes of scandalous and fashionable novels, whose adventures happened last week, within a furlong of St. James's.<sup>1</sup>

Prose fiction has often presupposed nothing more than some familiarity with the social system in which novelist and reader live. The appeal of Richardson, Fielding, Jane Austen, and most of Dickens and Thackeray is thus directly contemporaneous. But Scott's situation was not so simple; even though he went a long way toward meeting contemporary readers on their own ground, he could not go all the way; and the full appreciation of his novels therefore involves some consciousness of the enthusiastic scholarship that went into their making, and some modest competence in that fairly craggy subject, Scottish history.

It is significant that the literature of the Scott centenary has been biographical rather than critical; the most notable monument of this anniversary will no doubt be the great edition of the letters now in progress under the direction of Professor Grierson of Edinburgh. Another task which remains to be done is the proper editing of Lockhart's *Life*. More than once the suggestion has been made that this noble biography will outlast Scott's own works, and so much may be allowed, that the poems and novels gain in significance and interest when they are considered as integral parts of the great career recorded by Lockhart. As so often happens in real life, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. But this does not mean that the works will ever be relegated to the position of a commentary on the life. Both will stand on an equal footing. It may seem superfluous to urge that readers and critics should get back to Lockhart,

<sup>1</sup>London, 1822, pp. 63-64.

and yet we find the great Italian aesthetician Croce saying that though Scott has had considerable influence on novelists and historians, he is no more than a genial minor artist with a turn for the superficially picturesque. That is, Croce thinks of Scott only as the author of such books as *Ivanhoe*, *Quentin Durward*, and *The Talisman*. What is overlooked here is just the greater part of his career. A few good pages from one of the earlier works, from *Guy Mannering*, *The Antiquary*, *Old Mortality*, or *The Heart of Midlothian*, should be enough to offset such comment as this. The quality of this group of novels has been well rendered by Virginia Woolf, herself one of the subtlest of modern novelists. A character in the story called *To the Lighthouse* hears some one say that Scott is no longer read. Taking down *The Antiquary* (Scott's own favorite among his novels) he reads the scene at the fishers' cottage in which the Mucklebackit family mourns the drowning of their son Steenie. The father, Saunders Mucklebackit, sets about repairing his shattered boat, and says to Oldbuck, "It's weel wi' you gentles, that can sit in the house wi' handkerchers at your een when ye lose a friend; but the like o' us maun to our wark again, if our hearts were beating as hard as my hammer." This passage once came to the mind of Balzac, as he was toiling doggedly at the "Comédie Humaine"; here is its echo in the twentieth century:

This man's strength and sanity, his feeling for straightforward simple things, these fishermen, the poor old crazed creature in Mucklebackit's cottage made him feel so vigorous, so relieved of something that he felt roused and triumphant and could not choke back his tears. Raising the book a little to hide his face he let them fall and shook his head from side to side and forgot himself completely (but not one or two reflections about morality and French novels and English novels and Scott's hands being tied but his view perhaps being as true as the other view) forgot his own bothers and failure completely in poor Steenie's drowning

and Mucklebackit's sorrow (that was Scott at his best) and the astonishing delight and feeling of vigour that it gave him.

Well, let them improve upon that, he thought as he finished the chapter. He felt that he had been arguing with somebody, and had got the better of him. They could not improve upon that, whatever they might say; and his own position became more secure. The lovers were fiddlesticks, he thought, collecting it all in his mind again. That's fiddlesticks, that's first-rate, he thought, putting one thing beside another.<sup>1</sup>

The qualities of the novelist are the qualities of the man. Wholesome humanity, genial humor, gentleness, loyalty, and utter honesty—what more is there to be said about all these things? The present trend in biography and criticism is toward the study of intricate and morbid states of mind, the diagnosis of "damaged souls." Invariable success and consistent virtue are as monotonous as unrelieved sunshine. Starting with the biographical fragment which stands at the beginning of Lockhart, we work our way through a thousand letters, conversations, and episodes which show Scott in the full enjoyment of his world, the progress of the narrative marked by the familiar poems and novels as by so many milestones. We come to know scores of friends and correspondents; there is a touch of provincialism in many of them, and they cannot hold their own in a comparison with Dr. Johnson's Club as depicted by Boswell, but there is abundant variety, shrewdness, and absurdity in the records of a group which includes the ill-starred brothers, James and John Ballantyne; William Erskine, Lord Kinnedder, Scott's comrade in law and literature; William Clerk; Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, eccentric antiquary and literary recluse; Morritt of Rokeby; Joanna Baillie, whom contemporaries hailed as the greatest English dramatist since Shakespeare; James Hogg, the Ettrick

<sup>1</sup>London, 1927, p. 84.

Shepherd; Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield; the publishers Constable and Murray; George Ellis, the wit of the Anti-Jacobins; Robert Southey, who took the laureateship which Scott refused; Lady Louisa Stuart, who made novel reading a fine art. John Gibson Lockhart, the son-in-law and biographer, a self-righteous, hard-bitten soul, cannot command our sympathies as Boswell does, but he has one advantage over Boswell, that his record of the early and middle years of his hero is much more adequate. Scott speaks for himself all the way through. After the success of his early balladry he throws himself into countless literary projects, builds and adorns Abbotsford, buys more land, plans more books to get more money to buy still more land—and then comes the reversal which makes drama; after twenty years of incomparable triumph the failure of the Ballantyne firm and its allies early in 1826 ruined his personal fortunes, loaded him with a deficit of £120,000 which he chose to consider a debt of honor, and set him to seven grim years of labor in which he literally wrote himself to death. Here is a flaw, even a tragic error, in Scott's career, with the full penalty exacted and paid. Yet attacks at this point fail; no mordant biographer has been able to shake our esteem for Sir Walter, or to persuade us that he sold his salvation for the gimcracks of Abbotsford. We sometimes think of him as naïve and clumsy, yet he set down the record of this tragic struggle in his *Journal* with great penetration and delicacy. Although much of what he wrote after the bankruptcy is of secondary importance, the *Journal* magnificently rounds out a record which is at once life and literature. Seen in this perspective, the poems, the novels, and the life are part of a single system, and can no more be separated than the three peaks of Scott's own beloved Eildon Hills.

ALAN D. MCKILLOP.